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ABSTRACT

Therapeutic counseling, for either clinical or developmental purposes, has been traditionally influenced by the socio-cultural values in Western society. Central to these values, it can be argued, is liberal individualism that attempts to bring to people an increased sense of self-control and self-determination. As a result, many of the therapeutic approaches popular in the West are firmly grounded in such a premise. For Chinese people, however, whose cultural values are predominantly sociocentric and collectivistic in nature, it is inappropriate to simply implement these kinds of therapeutic approaches. Three conflicts were identified in a recent study about the role of college counselors as expected by Chinese college students: authoritarian/non-authoritarian role of counselor; judgmentalism/non-judgmentalism; and passivity/activity. It is pivotal that a counseling model takes into account Chinese cultural values regarding norms for appropriate social interactions. Chinese college counselors should take on these roles in talking with students: (1) be heuristic--more active and confrontive in identifying the problems for the client; (2) be active--more dynamic and innovative in talking with the client; (3) be discrete--more task-oriented in therapy and specify goals for the client as clearly as possible; and (4) be direct--more open and candid in attitudes toward the client. (LLL)

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Conflicts and Adaptation: a discussion of individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling and its implications for Chinese college counselors

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I. Introduction

Therapeutic counseling, for either clinical or developmental purposes, has been traditionally influenced by the socio-cultural values in Western society. Central to these values, it can be argued, is liberal individualism that attempts to bring to people an increased sense of self-control and self-determination. As a result, many of the therapeutic approaches popular in the West are firmly grounded in such a premise, and their language shaped by this philosophy as well. For Chinese people, however, whose cultural values are predominantly sociocentric and collectivistic in nature, it is inappropriate to simply implement these kinds of therapeutic approaches. Thus conceived, the present paper attempts to discuss the features of what I would call "individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling" and examine some of the cultural conflicts encountered when applying it in Chinese society. It also offers a cultural critique of these conflicts and reports on a research study I recently conducted regarding expectations of the college counselor by some Chinese college students in Beijing. The paper ends with some suggestions concerning what roles Chinese college counselors ought to play in counseling students.

II. Features of Individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling

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A. Definition

Individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling is hereby defined as a therapeutic process that aims to promote self-awareness and self-actualization of the client by bringing insights to his inner experiences and cultivating in him a greater degree of independence and integration. It is deeply rooted in the values of liberal individualism in the Western society and typically includes such therapies as person-centered therapy, existential therapy, Adlerian therapy, and to some degree, Gestalt therapy. What is common to these therapies is a deep respect for the individual's inner experiences and a trust in his capacity to make positive and constructive conscious choices (Corey, 1986). Additionally, they all attempt to increase the level of self-understanding, self-direction and self-determination in the individual and stress that the client and therapist relationship should be equals in a genuine and mutually respectful relationship. Finally, they also try to refrain from taking responsibility for the client by encouraging him to resolve his problems on his own.

B. Features of individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling

Given the above definition, individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling can be shown to embrace the following features.

a. Emphasis on increased self-awareness

An essential goal of individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling is to increase the client's self-awareness in terms of

his motives, interests, modes of thinking and freedom of choices, etc (Corey, 1986). Therefore, considerable emphasis is placed on self-exploration and self-disclosure of morbid thoughts and personal problems. Presumably, this helps the client experience his feelings more intensively and acquires insights about his patterns of behaviors in various situations which are therapeutically important to his present problem-solving. As a result, the client achieves a fuller degree of self-understanding and self-control.

b. Emphasis on responsibility and freedom

A sense of responsibility and freedom lies at the core of the individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling. It holds that taking responsibility for one's actions is a basic condition for change, and links this to personal freedom (Frankl, 1978). In addition, it assumes that the client has the potential to cope authentically with his troubles on his own and to discover alternative ways of being (Fischer & Fischer, 1983). It is important, therefore, that the client's potential be fully respected and actualized. Above all, it attempts to develop in the client an increased ability to accept and exercise the new-found freedom he comes to possess.

c. Emphasis on self-respect and equality

Another important feature of individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling is its emphasis on mutual respect in the client/counselor relationship (Rogers, 1961). Thus, it is imperative that the counselor respect the integrity of the

client, and adapt his thinking to the client's internal frames of reference. At the same time, the counselor does not want to keep his knowledge or expertise a secret. Nor does he attempt to mystify the therapeutic process. Therapeutically, this approach empowers the client by means of increasing faith, spontaneity and self-trust in his self-being.

d. Emphasis on non-advice giving

Related to self-respect is non-advice giving, by which a counselor is required to avoid making any judgements or criticisms of the client's feelings. Also required is that he gives no direct or discrete suggestions to the client's problem-solving. Instead, the counselor serves the client as an instrument of change and establishes a therapeutic climate that facilitates the client's growth from his own problem-solving efforts.

C. A cultural analysis of individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling

Given all of the above features, it may be concluded that individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling is oriented toward the premise that the individual possesses a capacity for growth and self-actualization. Moreover, embedded in this approach are many of the fundamental features of liberal individualism, such as autonomy, assertiveness, self-reliance, freedom of choice, and so on. Essential to its therapeutic goals is the task of helping the client take full responsibility for his own actions and life. Also centrally important are concepts such as self-awareness, self-identity, self-respect and self-determination. As a result,

the therapeutic process is self-explorative and its impact is self-reinforcing. All these features are not only culturally grounded in Western society, but are congruent with the spread of democracy in modern industrialized societies. And it is no surprise that individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling seeks to reinforce those very values from which it evolved.

III. Problems in applying the individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling to Chinese society

As stated above, the individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling is deeply-rooted in the values of self-respect, self-trust, and self-determination found in Western society. But for Chinese people, whose cultural values and socialization process are significantly different from the West, any direct use of these approaches would undoubtedly encounter conflicts in people's expectations of therapy and violate norms for social interactions. What follows is a discussion of three conflicts I identified through a recent study about the role of college counselors as expected by Chinese college students.

A. Conflict between authoritarian and non-authoritarian role of a counselor

As discussed earlier, one important feature of individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling is its emphasis on respect and equality in the counselor-client relationship. As such, the counselor is not necessarily superior to the client. Nor is he supposed to give him any direct advice or suggestions. Presumably, this would reinforce the sense of control and autonomy in the client so that he will be able to function better

on his own.

However, according to the results of my research*, most Chinese college students regard their counselors as teacher/parent figures. They expect to get from them concrete suggestions as to how to deal with their current problems. They also hope to be enlightened in their thinking about these problems and become mature accordingly. Above all, they are not used to solving problems by means of self-exploration and self-reinforcement. In fact, many students consider the counselor's reluctance to give advice as signs of either unwillingness to help them or incompetence to do so.

In retrospect, most college counselors I interviewed also believe that they should play a leading role in helping students understand and solve their problems. They are much more comfortable with making analyses for the students than with encouraging students do so on their own. In view of these facts, it is obvious that a non-directive approach to counseling, as advocated by the Rogers and others, would easily frustrate Chinese college students in terms of their respect for authority and need for direction. Meanwhile, the approach is equally frustrating to Chinese college counselors in terms of their unfulfilled responsibility to lead the students to grow, which is much more explicitly expected in Chinese society than in West

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* The research was conducted in Beijing in the summer of 1991, during which I conducted interviews as well as open-ended questionnaires to collect information about expectations of the college counselor by both college students and people who engagegd in student counseling.

society.

B. Conflicts between judgmentalness and non-judgmentalness

Another important feature of the individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling is to be non-judgmental in therapy, by which the counselor is required not to share his personal opinions or experiences regarding the client's understanding and resolution of his problems.

Again, the results of my study indicate that it is very difficult for a Chinese college counselor to maintain such a position. Most counselors I interviewed indicated that they would not hesitate to communicate their personal opinions during counseling. Some even tried to help students by exposing to them their own life experiences which were similar to what students were currently going through. Many college counselors also believed that the more concrete and specific the counselor's suggestions were to the students, the more the students would benefit from the counseling.

Finally, the Chinese college counselors' willingness to share their personal opinions or life experiences in therapy can not simply be taken as an indication of unprofessionalism. It demonstrates the high degree of interdependence and mutuality that is culturally expected in a client/counselor relationship in Chinese society.

C. Conflicts between passivity and activity

One other important feature of the individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling is to encourage the client to take control

of talking and initiate topics for discussion. Accordingly, it requires that the counselor be flexible and adaptable to what the counselee wants to discuss.

In contrast, the findings of my research indicate that a passive way of talking is as confusing for Chinese counselor as it is for Chinese student. For instance, most counselors I interviewed claimed that they could not imagine themselves being passive or silent during counseling sessions. They were afraid that this might let the conversation go wild, and that it would appear useless to the students. They were also concerned that by letting the students take control of the talking, they would lose face and eventually devalue their work. On the other hand, many students I interviewed also indicated that they wanted to see their counselors more active in talking and more directive in their efforts to help them. Therefore, it is really questionable that the counselor should encourage the student to take control of the talking.

IV. A cultural analysis of the conflicts

Though the discussion of the conflicts is far from being exhaustive, yet it is sufficient to indicate that a direct implementation of the individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling is inappropriate for use with college students in China, as its underlying assumptions conflict with many cultural values in Chinese society. A brief analysis of these cultural conflicts is given below.

First of all, it may be generally argued that the essence of

these conflicts lies in the differences in the socialization processes of Chinese and the societies in the West. Specifically, since American society is embedded in the values of individualism such as autonomy, self-reliance, freedom of speech and choice, the people of the society are socialized to assert their interests openly and to strive for self-actualization throughout their lives. Chinese society, to the contrary, is embedded in values of socio-centrism which prizes characteristics such endurance, self-control, and self-cultivation. As a result, Chinese people are socialized to submit their interests to those of their family and the society and to fulfill whatever is expected of them accordingly.

Therefore, it is important to note that conformity and compliance, which are not emphasized in the socialization process in the West, are absolutely essential to formation of Chinese characters. For instance, Yang (1986) argues that the socialization of Chinese people consists of the following central practices: (a) dependency training, (b) conformity training, (c) modesty training, (d) self-suppression training, (e) self-contentment training, (f) punishment preference, (g) shaming strategy, (h) parentredness, and (i) multiple-parenting. Practices such as these, as Yang concludes, acculturate the Chinese with a strong collectivistic inclination, which is characterized by features of conformity, interdependence, self-control and respect for authority.

In short, the cultural differences such as these have

important therapeutic implications for use of counseling services in Chinese society. They affect the extent to which the counselor is perceived as helpful or not as well as the ways in which the counselor can effectively interact with the client. They determine what therapeutic goals would be appropriate and what therapeutic language is meaningful. They predispose the nature of therapeutic relationship between counselor and client and prelude the tone of interactions between them as well. Above all, they alert people to the need to examine and even challenge the cultural assumptions in which a particular kind of counseling is grounded.

V. Suggestions for development of a culturally appropriate model for counseling Chinese college students

On the basis of the above discussions, it is pivotal that a counseling model that takes into account the Chinese cultural values regarding norms for appropriate social interactions in therapeutic encounters be developed for Chinese college students. And it seems that the development of such a model would invariably entail features of interdependence, compliance and shared responsibility which, as discussed earlier, are essential to the process of socialization in Chinese society. Thus conceived, I propose that Chinese college counselors should take on the following roles in talking with students.

A. Be heuristic

As discussed above, Chinese college students tend to view the counselor as a father/teacher figure. Therefore, it is important that client self-determination be not overemphasized in

therapy. Instead, the counselor should assume a heuristic role in communicating with the client. More specifically, the counselor should be more active and confrontative in identifying the problems for the client. He should also be flexible in airing his opinions about the client's understanding and resolution of his problems. Finally, he should be aware that the client benefits most from counseling when he is induced (not necessarily instructed) to think for himself. In brief, he should not be too individualism-minded in setting up his therapeutic goals for the client.

On the other hand, it should also be cautioned that being heuristic does not necessarily mean being authoritative. That is, the counselor should not try to make decisions for the client or force him into accepting his viewpoints regarding his problems. It is important to realize that the responsibility should be shared by both parties.

B. Be active

By being active, I mean the counselor should be more dynamic and innovative in talking with the client. More specifically, the counselor should be prepared to take the lead in talking and initiate topics for discussion. He should also be careful in using silence therapeutically. Above all, he should not let the client feel that he is unwilling or unable to help him.

C. Be discrete

By being discrete, I mean the counselor should be more task-oriented in therapy and specify his goals for the client as

clearly as possible. In other words, the counselor should let the client know clearly what he may be able to achieve from the counseling so that he can regularly check on its progress. Hopefully, this will enable the client see the benefits of counseling and stimulate his interests in it.

D. Be direct

By being direct, I mean the counselor should be more open and candid in his attitudes toward the client. Specifically, the counselor should not hesitate to speak out his thoughts and feelings about the problems presented by the client as long as he does not attempt to impose them on the client. Nor should he be overly concerned with the issue of non-judgmentalness in therapy. Lastly, he should be aware that being direct does not necessarily mean being authoritarian. The difference between the two lies in the degree to which the counselor shows respect for the client and extent to which the counselor let the client have the final say for his own affairs.

In conclusion, the four proposed roles are all based on the assumption that social interactions in therapeutic encounters for the Chinese should be much more interactive and task-oriented than those in the West. It is hoped that the adaptations such as the above would eventually lead to development of a counseling model that is culturally appropriate and meaningful for Chinese people.

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